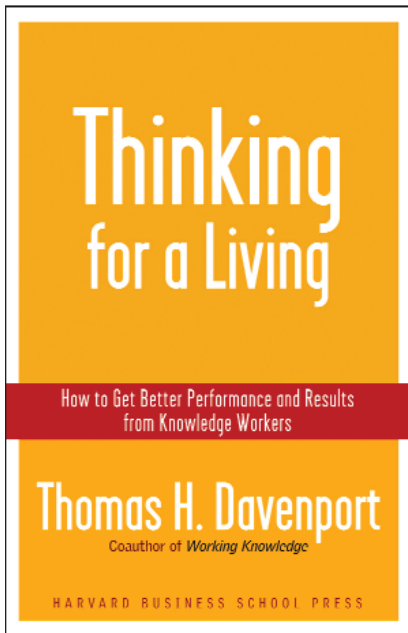


Thinking on Target



Thinking for a Living: How to Get Better Performance and Results from Knowledge Workers

By Thomas A. Davenport
Reviewed by Skip Corsini



TOM DAVENPORT is one of the most interesting people I have never met.

Our lives have intersected only through his writing. Yet, his ideas have provided a rationale for my professional behaviors for the last 30 years. I first learned that five years ago when I read his collaboration with Lawrence Prusak, *Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know*.

At that time, I discovered that my compulsion to act as a conduit for new ideas is a common characteristic of knowledge workers, also known as “idea practitioners.” Davenport and Prusak explained that we are a legion of people who usually work in the middle of large organizations or industry networks. More specifically, we’re the people who beg, borrow, and often steal ideas about business improvement from one source and transfer them to our workplaces.

People often ask us, “What are you reading these days?” And for a few years now, my answer has been, “whatever Tom Davenport is writing.” *Thinking For a Living* is a quantum leap forward.

Idea practitioners are students of company culture and communication hierarchies. The best Dilbert spotters in their organizations, they know how to maneuver around workplace dysfunctions to help people approach their full potential. And while they believe that people and organizations can change, they aren’t a bunch of blind nitwits: They know when to push buttons and when to wait, and they know the short cuts to putting ideas into action.

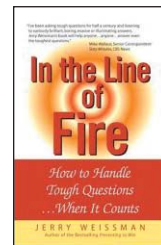
Fortunately, people such as Davenport are around to help bosses understand how knowledge workers think and operate, and what it takes to cultivate and nurture the work that they do. By writing *Thinking for a Living*, he does all of us idea practitioners a solid favor: He gives the people we serve a complete conceptual and tactical framework for working with us, as well as other resources to achieve desired goals. He explains that while we are busy creating

Hot Topics

Maybe it’s the continuing heat, but this month’s selections sizzle.

In the Line of Fire: How to Handle Tough Questions...When It Counts

By Jerry Weissman
(Financial Times/Prentice Hall, August 2005, \$25.95)



With personality that exudes from each page, Weissman isn’t lying when he writes, “All the techniques you are about to learn require absolute truth.”

In fact, he cites many accounts of famous political situations to illustrate how the truth really can set you free...as long as you relate your answers in a clever, controlled manner. He uses his years of credible experience as a presentations coach to teach readers how to leverage their power with executive communication methods. It is a brilliant read. And although I was initially skeptical of how someone can use the word *truth* in discussions about Big Business and politics, I finished the book convinced and ready to be challenged.

— Tish Few

Effective Succession Planning: Ensuring Leadership Continuity and Building Talent from Within

By William J. Rothwell
(AMACOM, June 2005, \$65)



It’s a topic for discussion around the water cooler and the boardroom table: succession planning. For organizations that don’t take their future talent needs seriously, that

future may not be so bright. In fact,

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the innovations, strategies, and tactics to keep our companies afloat, they are busy trying to fit us into the same boxes they have been filling since the days of the robber barons and wood-burning stoves. He says mismanaging us is a mistake that they will come to regret because of our growing ranks.

Thinking for a Living is a manifesto for knowledge workers and knowledge work. Davenport teaches our bosses how to identify us, understand our differences, experiment with us, use technology to advance our work, create positive work environments, and outline the processes we use to get things done. In sum, he shows them how to manage our unique resources. And as a bonus, readers also get a glimpse into how organizations rework big ideas, the most important products of knowledge workers.

If you want to get to the heart of *Thinking for a Living*, go straight to the ninth chapter: "Managing Knowledge Workers." In it, Davenport describes some of the specific changes managers of the future will need to make to get most out of their knowledge workers. He says that they must start working alongside of us instead of overseeing; and they should organize communities, not hierarchies. They also must learn to make organizational culture an asset, and fend off bureaucracy.

Davenport hits the nail on the head with that last prediction, particularly when the "gamer generation" pushes us Boomers into the nether reaches of our organizations. If forecasts for the coming shortage of labor—particularly educated labor—are even close, old school management is going to disappear, not gradually, but overnight.

Whenever I read a book by Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, I find to fully understand it, I have to go back and

read one or two of his prior works for a little context. So, I took the same course of action here and read another Davenport-Prusak collaboration called, *What's the Big Idea?*

Released in 2003, the book helps companies capitalize from the authors' study of more than 100 "thought leaders" such as Michael Porter, Peter Drucker, and the darling of the day, Malcolm Gladwell. I highly recommend buying it as a supplement to *Think For a Living*.

Another note about the book: Davenport's works have hit home with real-world idea practitioners, such as Dan Holtshouse. He first met Davenport and Prusak in the early 1990s at a major internal conference at Xerox.

"Tom and Larry presented a study on document management at a time when knowledge management was first becoming a full-fledged movement," he said.

"In the years since, we have worked on other projects. Tom has a real feel for how to get below the surface of the knowledge worker's work, and to synthesize those understandings into broader frameworks that are keys to building high-performance workplaces."

In other words, he's telling managers to drink deeply from this great book. It's a four-cupper, black.

Thinking for a Living: How to Get Better Performance and Results from Knowledge Workers, by Thomas A. Davenport. Harvard Business School Press: Boston. 240 pp. \$27.50

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when you factor in the Aging Workforce (a new label for Baby Boomers?), the need goes beyond critical.

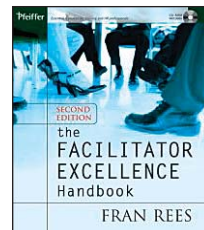
Although the book is sold with a CD of forms and other canned material to help the reader put the issue into focus, the book is definitely not a cookie-cutter approach. Numerous detailed examples and key questions take into account the varying cultures of organizations. Although the look of the book is rather academic, the text and the wide array of charts, lists, and steps are very approachable and shouldn't scare off any reader.

At the very end of the book, the author touches on the topic of CEO succession planning, which can be problematic. But the case study offered as an example would be unlikely to ruffle the feathers of even the most maniacal chief executive.

—Rex Davenport

The Facilitator Excellence Handbook

By Fran Rees
(Pfeiffer, June 2005, \$50)



The term *facilitator* encompasses a broad meaning in this updated edition of the original bestseller.

Not only does Rees address the needs of those who run meetings, she also tackles the roles of team and organizational facilitators. This revised edition contains all the original sections, plus four new chapters that deal with difficult situations, conflict resolutions, virtual teams, and the qualities of great facilitators.

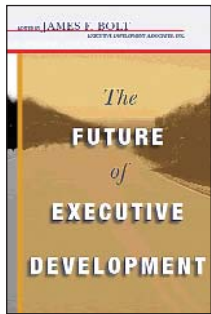
The beauty of this book is that its information is applicable to all experience levels. Veteran facilitators can strengthen their weaknesses, while beginners learn process-management basics. In addition, the book is filled with charts, handouts, and other re-

sources that make the learning process easier. Rees includes a supplemental reading list at the ends of the chapters, and there's even a section for readers to learn how to manage themselves.

—Josephine Rossi

The Future of Executive Development

Edited by James F. Bolt
(Executive Development Associates,
June 2005, \$27.95 paperback)



Twenty-eight experts contributed chapters to this executive development handbook (now in paperback), enabling readers to gain a variety of perspectives on topics in the

book's three main sections: What Does the Future Look Like?, The Big-Impact Methods for Developing Executives, and Future Challenges and Opportunities. (Section One includes highlights from a 2004 survey of executive development trends.)

Jim Bolt, the book's editor and author of four of the chapters, is the chairman and founder of Executive Development Associates, a consulting firm that has worked with half of the Fortune 100 companies and many others around the world.

The contributors Bolt includes, almost half of whom have PhDs or other advanced degrees, provide case studies, statistics and research, formulas and figures, and more to create a serious and information-rich book that would work well as a textbook for many practitioners in the workplace development field.

—Eva Kaplan-Leiserson